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Parricide, Abuse, and Emotional Processing

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Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2015

I13 Parricide, Abuse, and Emotional Processing

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the extremely rare phenomenon of parricide and many of its implications.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating that further, well-designed studies are needed in order to confront this underestimated but very serious problem facing families.

Parricide is a very rare phenomenon and represents only a small percentage of all homicides committed. In Europe and the United States, it is estimated that the occurrence of this crime makes up between 2% and 4% of all murders in those regions, with patricides outnumbering matricides.¹⁻⁷ In Italy, the 2008 European Employment Services-Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (EURES-ANSA) Report observed that the rate of parricide in Italy makes up 3% of all homicides committed, with the rate of matricide being significantly higher (59%) than patricide.

Homicide occurs more frequently in homes where the victim and perpetrator cohabitate.^{8,9} When a minor commits parricide, he or she does so in a cold and calculated manner and does so in such a way as to avoid confrontation with the victim; for example, when the parent is sleeping, watching television, or engaged in some other activity.¹⁰ Parricide is rarely committed during a violent altercation between parent and child.

Males are much more likely to commit parricide.¹¹⁻¹⁶ For example, when Marleau et al. investigated parricide cases committed in Canada between 1961 and 1989, they observed that males committed 90% of these killings.¹⁷ A vast majority of the literature regarding young perpetrators of parricide shows that minors kill in order to bring years of abuse to an end. Other factors that may influence this phenomenon have also been identified, in particular, the presence of psychiatric disorders and the antisocial tendencies of minors.^{18,19} These seem to be important aspects in the implementation of this crime. Based upon this, it is possible to identify three categories of juvenile perpetrators of patricide: (1) adolescents who suffer from serious mental pathologies; (2) antisocial adolescents; and, (3) adolescents who have endured severe abuse and who kill as a reaction to their circumstances.²⁰ Minors who are systematically punished, criticized, treated with hostile rejection, or ignored by their primary caregivers tend to believe that they are at fault, unwanted, bad, or unlovable.²¹ Such global and negative beliefs about oneself elicit shame because, when shame is experienced, the sense of self is threatened and attention is focused internally.²² In this way, minors who have been or who are currently being treated in a punitive manner seem to develop a different disposition regarding the emotion of shame and their reactions to other life events when compared to those minors who have not been maltreated. For example, Alessandri and Lewis pointed out that maltreated minors (i.e., neglected; physically, sexually, and emotionally abused), from 4-5 years of age, exhibit much more shame when they make a mistake and show less pride when they do well with respect to their non-maltreated peers.²³

Lack of affection, brutality, various forms of violence, and coercion coming from one or both parents may be elements that facilitate the formation of highly discordant and unrestrained personality structures. Furthermore, the presence of a generation gap may be unbridgeable in more serious situations. This is characterized by reciprocal incomprehension and an absence of clear and direct forms of communication regarding central aspects of relational life. In addition, one fact that this study would particularly like to underscore relates to the presence of emotional imbalances and alterations that may act to compromise the formation of a mature self that is endowed with healthy sensitivity and the capacity to foresee the consequences of one's own actions as well as those of others. For this reason, it is necessary to view parricide as a process that is comprised of precipitating risk factors that need to be identified early on, both at the clinical level and at the criminological and forensic psychiatric level as well, in an attempt to avoid tragic and irreversible "acting out."



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Parricide, Patricide, Matricide